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2020

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AUDRE LORDE
& THE ONTOLOGY OF DESIRE

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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13 DECEMBER 2019

[These are] two of the most fundamental questions one can ask:
Where do babies come from? and Where do stories come from?

—Barbara Johnson, “My Monster/My Self”

I. PROLOGUE

If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infinity of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field—that is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization. This field is in fact that of freeplay, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions.

—Jacques Derrida, “On Structure, Sign, and Play”

Targets are most effectively hit when indirectly aimed at.

—Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion”

By nature, the examples of the poets, theorists, critics, and feminists whose work that I cite in this essay will be somewhat random. What these writers that I reference have in common is that they are the ones whose work I’ve read, and of those that I’ve read, it is these that rattle around in the empty spaces of my brain most frequently. It is not so much that my body “knows unheard-of songs” (Cixous 876) but rather that, on a day-to-day basis, it is the site of cacophonous yelling and all-around general mayhem. The structure of this thesis reflects how I approach these concepts in my mind, and how I hold them within my body.

The sections that follow may seem strange at first. The argument I present in this thesis is one possible thread that I have followed to the edge of meaning and metaphor as far as I can push it. But just as time is an imagined linear story we tell ourselves to explain movement, any essay that claims to totalize concepts within a linear narrative is at its essence self-deluding, and the practice of such authorial self-delusion is what Dorothy Dinnerstein would call an “exercise in pseudomastery” that fools neither author nor reader. Dinnerstein therefore underlines emphatically the importance “in reading unsystematically and taking notes erratically” (ix). I see no other way to approach the infinity of the field of the body with finite language, either in my analysis or in my description of it, than to grapple with (read: embrace) the mess to the extent that one can. For myself, this has manifested in writing that more closely mirrors the “inhuman flood of printed human utterance” than a systematic reading of what and how much to take in.

Perhaps understandably, this method of reading and writing provokes great discomfort; in her book *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* Dinnerstein herself acknowledges that “part of why it has taken me so long to finish is that I am threatened by it myself” (ix). But discomfort is a sign to go deeper, not to turn away, and this discomfort must be faced if the arguments I make have any validity. To embrace that which threatens is to begin to understand that which we would rather close our eyes to.

That said, it can be as questionable as it is tempting to generate sweeping conclusions about the meaning of The Human Experience™ from these more or less random examples. The “but actually!”s of this thesis cry out for attention at every turn. I do not address all of them, or even a small percentage of them. This does not mean I am unaware that they exist. If I were to predict every possible counterargument to this paper and analyze its throughline I would never finish, and besides, I am not interested in rebutting every possible counterargument.

An essay that revels in the self-congratulation of an ironclad argument is one which, in truth, I hope to avoid. In merging the psychoanalytic concept of paranoia with Paul Recour’s hermeneutics of suspicion, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick finds that paranoid modes of reading are those that pose the question, “Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know?” and which further entangle, rather than clarify, the particular relationship between knowledge and speaker. Reparative readings, under Sedgwick’s definition, are those that instead ask: “What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it...? *How*, in short, is knowledge performative?” (124), and it is a reparative mode of reading in which I ground this thesis.

Reparative readings have been undercut and subordinated by the valuation of, and prestige therefore associated with, paranoid ones in the post-Freudian era of pathologizing diagnosis. However, abandoning a paranoid mode of reading in favor of a reparative one “does not *intrinsically* or *necessarily* enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences... does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression” (127-128). I do not hold the reality of oppression lightly, and moreover this holding is not mutually exclusive with the exploration of modes of thinking informed by but not tethered to that oppression. At some point, a fixation on the “but actually”s emerges more from paranoia,

and discomfort from nontotalization, than from a desire to truly integrate modes of understanding or understand the path of knowledge that tracks between speaker, reader, author, and text(s).

Fortunately for me, Lorde's poetry knows itself; it declares itself. As Wendy Belcher puts it, "my work... has not been to unmask any lies of the text, not to declare it false, but rather to speak its truths" (42). In attempting to speak the truth of Lorde's poetry, I have approached this small excerpt from her body of work with all the consideration I have to offer it. I have found that to tackle these ideas head-on is to stare the Gorgon in the face and become paralyzed, or else to have them disappear through my fingers like sand. Better to approach it obliquely instead, with soft steps, through a mirror, behind glass, tapping it gently. And tell me besides, who is it that can understand but by inches?¹

¹ "Nothing can be done / but by inches" (Rich 362).

II. IN WHICH I REBUT POSSIBLE COUNTERARGUMENTS

I am deeply suspicious of claims that accept as their basis terms steeped in biological determinism, and of those that proclaim the divine power of woman untempered. To argue that woman represents a mystical affirmation of creative energy, or that the erotic is the “assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered” (Lorde 89), is to brush uncomfortably close to gender essentialism. There exists a centuries-old belief, still going strong today, that childbearing *is* physically, and *represents* metaphysically, the female creative act. It is not. To define a woman by biological inevitability is to succumb to the “interpretation of history produced up to now by the class of men” (Wittig 1907), an interpretation that entrenches the kind of biological destiny that buttresses the patriarchy (Rich 80-81) and that leads to women producing work that characterizes themselves in the same way that the patriarchy does. Lorde’s poetry does not preclude analysis and discussion of a non-biologically determinist feminism, but it does not permit a nuanced critique on its own terms.²

The close association of women with any part of the body, not just the womb, can easily teeter and collapse back onto the very structures that method means to erode (Foucault, is that you knocking?). Women have been cast in the role of Body, as Beauvoir says, “weighed down by everything peculiar to it” (xvi). As Susan Bordo has noted, the Western conception of mind-body dualism is historically gendered (5), and it has paradoxically “alienated us [women] from our bodies by incarcerating us in them” (Rich 13). The equation of woman with body is what has allowed her to be commodified, objectified, and marketed (some, like Irigaray, believe the exchange and use value of women to be the building block upon which Western society is founded), or else become the neurotic projection of both the corrupted site of bleedings and discharges, and the mystical, the sacred, and the pure. How long we remain unable to abandon this thinking is how long we remain enslaved to those structures.

Yet the issue cannot be so simple as all that, since I allow bodies to shape this thesis. Why? As Lorde herself writes, “every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of

² By the same token, while it is unfair to call Lorde’s work transphobic, it could certainly be considered trans-exclusionary. Given that she was writing through the 60s, 70s, and 80s, perhaps this is understandable. My ignorance of it would not be.

power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change” (87) to ensure its perpetuation. The issue of materiality is such a conspicuous part of discussions of oppression because the “failure to ground discourse in materiality is to privilege the position of those whose subjectivity and agency, outside the realm of gender and sexuality, have never been subjugated” (Johnson 16). Women must rely on the subjective experience of their bodies in understanding the world around them, just as they are taught to ignore this knowledge. I myself live within my body, and I do not enjoy much of a luxury of choice on this matter. Male models of power usually ignore the body wholesale in favor of what is “inevitable, like a pure idea, like the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit” (de Beauvoir 135), and so it is possible to imagine the body as one form of power located within the culture of the oppressed that can change that culture.

Now, the body is not the new god or the substituted center for the destruction of oppression, nor should it be. The kind of sex positivity rooted in individualism and self-empowerment is rehearsed and parroted so fiercely in feminist conversations on college campuses, for example, because it allows women to believe that the performance of an autonomous body and the existence of delimiting social norms are mutually exclusive.³ The throwaway empowering statement uttered by a woman “it feels right to me” or “I do it because it feels good” does not mean that she is not oppressed—the motto of second-wave feminism is “the personal is political,” not “the personal is good,” for a reason.

I choose instead to detail an analysis of Lorde’s felt sense descriptions informed by models of oppression. First and foremost, when I refer to womb creation and creative acts, I refer to them through a deepening or further inscribing of selfhood that is possible regardless of the condition of the body one inhabits. I emphasize the body in this essay only insofar as one that is not necessarily female but one that is human, focusing on “neutral ground” parts: hands, eyes, faces, shapes, and how the body operates to inform a sense of self. While I place special focus on the womb, I do not equate womb with Woman, and push my conclusions towards a concept of selfhood applicable beyond that concept.

³ We refuse “to believe that the agent is not entirely autonomous, believe that I can be subject and object of violence at the same time, believe that I have not chosen the conditions under which I must choose” (Johnson 222). The end goal is not the right to choose, or to own one’s choices. It is the right to own choices made possible outside of circumscribed ideals.

At the end of the day, I believe any change is possible only insofar as it destroys “the doctrine of the difference” between the sexes. True resistance demands the destruction of the *class* of women by which men wield control, a destruction that “can be accomplished only by the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between the sexes to justify this oppression” (Wittig 1913). Thus my thesis could be described as operating, in Brenda Cossman’s terms, within the movement of “continental drift” (20) away from feminism towards what she describes as “queer theory,” with a hope oriented towards sex and sexuality imagined independently of gender.

In actuality, Lorde’s self-described “black lesbian mother warrior poet” identity involves not just gender but also three other distinct conduits from which to discuss the ability of the body to operate on its own self-referential but not meaningless terms. One of these is the knowledge of biological mothers, who experience first-hand the dissolution of flesh-defined boundaries of identity—Rich calls her children “neither me nor not-me” (64)—whereas a man’s experience of becoming a father happens entirely absent from his body.

There are certain aspects unique to lesbian desire, too, that allow us to see how the body operates a posteriori independently of, rather than circumscribing, normative cultural practices and epistemology. Lesbians specifically must describe their experiences via the body because of language’s inadequacy to do so. In *The Politics of Reality*, philosopher Marilyn Frye notes that dictionaries generally agree that sexual “means something on the order of pertaining to the genital union of a female and a male animal, and that ‘having sex’ is having intercourse—intercourse being defined as the penetration of a vagina by a penis, with ejaculation.” The inevitable conclusion is that “all sexuality is heterosexuality” (156). Thus there is no act two women can perform in the absence of men that could be called “having sex” without semantic oddity. Thus “speaking of women who have sex with other women is like speaking of ducks who engage in arm wrestling” (157); the term “lesbian,” as Ruth Ginzberg characterizes it, is “self-referentially meaningless” (75) because the entire notion of lesbian desire is semantically excluded from a phallocratic conceptual scheme.

The resulting semantic abyss isn’t formed by happenstance; as Ginzberg points out, “semantic holes don’t just happen.” They arise during language creation and are excellent

indicators of “metadistortions in the conceptual scheme” (76). If Frye’s claim is correct, then this knowledge emerges from the realizations unique to lesbian experience, and the coincidence that it is mostly lesbian-identifying women who have furthered the conceptual development of a bodily-described eros turns out not to be such a coincidence after all, because operating within such a semantic hole, the only way to find or construct meaning emerges from a lived experience that is not constricted by the limits of phallocratic language.

I have chosen specifically to focus on desiring bodies partly in resistance to the kind of desexualized lesbianism wielded as social or political ammunition for anti-patriarchal invective. Writing in 1992, Ruth Ginzberg warned that “lesbian identity is in danger of becoming reduced to some kind of mystical spiritualism... if heterosexual women who breast-feed girl babies get to co-opt the term ‘lesbian,’ then they [lesbians] want another, different, word to describe themselves as women who are sexually active with other lesbians” (79). By this decade, Ginzberg noted that “lesbian” was coming to mean something other than women who have sex with women. Nowadays, this worry is echoed on a broader scale; in a 2012 article, sexuality scholar Brenda Cossman writes of the more encompassing term “queer”:

I cannot help but recoil from the deployment of queer as a mere synonym for ‘gay,’ only hipper. Queer parenting, queer marriage, queer community—while I do not suggest that the practices of parenting or marriage or community could not in fact be queered, I question the extent to which the mere insertion of queer as an adjective in front of those practices does so. (22)

A great number of queer-identifying people have found solidarity and community through the use of the term, gained a sense of empowerment alongside it. For a great many other people, queer still rhymes with slur. You will not find me using the word to describe women or their lived experiences beyond this paragraph. I will focus on the bodily aspects of lesbian experience, specifically desire and sex, as one means of attempting to circumvent this issue. Desire in and of itself, and of any orientation, is a transgressive way of approaching this concept of selfhood because it “cannot suture bodies onto identities; it fails to arrest its metonymic slide with the fiction of a unified self” (Menon 16). What we share in common is desire itself, or desire for

desire; it is no surprise that this desire is rooted in the flesh, a desiring body that is the most universal of givens.⁴

And still there are aspects that I do not address. Lorde's description as a black lesbian mother warrior poet is not separated by commas because they do not and cannot operate as discrete factors of identity. No one should divorce bodies from their context and their identity, and indeed it is those who live that way that suffer the most. Many trauma survivors, including women, people of color, and the poor, who face generational trauma concomitant with social oppression,⁵ will tell you the body is, at times, the most dangerous place to inhabit; the lucky ones will say that it is the only place where healing can begin, painfully and slowly.

Intersectional feminism takes its very name from the acknowledgement that these axes of oppression, brought into focus on the material body, do not interact independently of one another. I have in a sense artificially divorced these axes here, for this is not a text that addresses Lorde's blackness directly. None of the poems I have selected reference a diasporic or racial identity directly. Some might call that a sin—an unforgivable one at that, coming from a white writer. Perhaps this is true. White Americans have been ignoring, erasing, abusing, torturing, appropriating, killing, enslaving, raping, lynching, and marginalizing black bodies for centuries. This thought experiment is normally one to which I would find great objections in its assumptions, for in reality, Lorde's poetry deserves a far more thoughtful consideration of race than what I can begin to print on these white pages.⁶ However, in the interest of time, manageable scope, departmental requirements, and my sanity, I have chosen instead to focus on only one or two aspects of Lorde's identity, those to which I have felt capable of learning from and speaking for given my constraints. We can begin by tackling the body's basic senses.

⁴ When I refer to bodies in this text, I refer to able and cisgender bodies.

⁵ As but one example of hundreds, blacks are *four times* more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia in this country than any other demographic (Schwartz).

⁶ One of several is Lorde's operating within a postcolonial and diasporic context; she was American, born to Caribbean immigrant parents—her mother from Grenada in the West Indies and her father from Barbados. For more reading on this topic and an in-depth discussion of Lorde's racial identity, I recommend perusing the works by Dhairyam, Hammonds, Keating, Leonard, and Strongman listed along with my other bibliographic citations.

III. EYES WIDE CLOSED

How sister gazed at sister
reaching through mirrored pupils
back to the mother

—Adrienne Rich, “Sibling Mysteries”

Images of eyes, hands, fingers, bodies, and flesh echo throughout Lorde’s erotic poems, making them so sensory-laden as to seem to bypass the mind altogether. In “Therapy,” Lorde describes what it is like “trying to see” the beloved. Lorde’s eyes seem to have a mind of their own, “seeking” and “fingering” as they grow. Together they are a “hungry child,” demanding and even a little greedy; they have co-opted the senses of the other parts of her body, taking on the fingers’ tactile sensations and agency as their own. This child has even co-opted the subject’s body, rifling through her “spaces” in order to feed its own hunger. The eyes have needs like a child does and are dependent on another being for survival and function as a child is.

Lorde construes this search for nourishment via negativa: the eyes themselves are “confused” because “it is not your face” they are looking for. This search for a source of nourishment does not seem to be oriented in any focused direction. Our eyes remain as equally confused as Lorde’s; as hers seek, ours read, and the goal of their looking has been revealed to neither. No wonder Lorde’s eyes are confused “trying to see”—we are not visible to Lorde’s physical eyes, or even her mind’s eye. The double-play on eye-I here is suggestive, for “I want to make you” reads aloud the same as “eye want to make you.” As Lorde describes her desire first by exclusion, then in positive terms, the image of the eye disappears, hidden from view in the resulting I. The reader must rely on a sense other than sight to see Lorde’s eye-I. Maybe we can take Lorde at face-value when she says “it is not your face” her eyes search for, because when we look at a face (“eye”) what we actually mean to look at is what the face signifies (“I”).

This is in direct contrast to psychoanalytic theory of the gaze. In the mid-1970s, Laura Mulvey first described the objectification of women in film through the visual representation of their bodies. Scopophilia, or the gratification of looking, “arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (2087); yet because looking is reserved

explicitly for male viewers, ego identification with the female person-image brings into play a fear of castration. Mulvey summarizes this neatly with “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” (2088), in which the image of woman passively bears the active gaze of man. As the psychoanalytic mode defines it, desire is reduced to sight and sight alone in the context of a phallocentric visual world. If sight is the sole means of pleasure in a heterosexual schema, in a self-referential lesbian one, the mechanics of sight are figured as something far beyond literal vision. But even in a heterosexual scenario, vision is next to useless in understanding and perceiving love (how often do we stop to wonder why we turn off the lights or close our eyes during sex?). Comprehensive perception becomes defined not only by what the body can see but also by what it cannot.

The lesbian body operating as such, at least the one as described by Lorde, is just as incapable of crossing the bridge to another body via physical sight. The lover must instead reappropriate her own body and the functions of that body to view and connect with a lover. In “Pirouette,” Lorde tells us that the beloved’s hands are “blind needles.” A needle does, in fact, normally have an eye, but it is no seeing eye. A blind needle is doubly so, because it does not have an eye and so it cannot hold the thread that would stitch two fabrics together. The beloved’s hands, acting as “blind needles,” are not capable of the literal sight that Lorde’s eyes are from the first line of the poem (“I saw”). And yet they seem to work just as well as any pair of eyes, capable of “reading over” Lorde’s lips and, quite impossibly, “sewing up stone.” For Lorde to say “I saw you” is not to say that the “you” has truly been seen. The beloved’s body becomes the acting body, and it is through her blind hands that she sews, that she reads, that she searches; her hands end up being more powerful than Lorde’s eyes ever could be.

IV. BREATH & BODY

A conversation... inscribes with its unreturning stylus
the isolation it denies.

—Adrienne Rich, “Cartographies of Silence”

Sappho once memorably called dying the equivalent of “having been breathed out,” and the association between breath and life has changed very little in the two millennia since. The cry of the infant is the cry of life, and thus demand is the “originary vocative which assures life even as it inaugurates alienation” (Johnson 232).⁷ It seems natural, therefore, to conclude that the granting of voice through the rhetorical figure of apostrophe, especially in lyric poetry, is another form of live-giving. Yet in her essay “Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion,” Barbara Johnson finds that far from giving a subject voice, apostrophe serves only as “a form of ventriloquism through which the subject throws voice” (218), since overlaying one’s poetic voice over a subject necessitates that subject’s silence in the first place. Whether intentionally or not, the poet who means to grant voice to the subject circularly denies exactly that which she attempts to give.

So what happens when a mother-poet refuses to invoke apostrophe, to invoke breath, life, and voice at all? In “Bloodbirth,” Lorde does not apostrophize the fetus, and in fact overtly refuses to do so, referring to the child only as

that which is inside of me screaming
beating about for exit or entry
names the wind, wanting winds’ voice
wanting winds’ power

The child desires winds’ voice, a voice that Lorde either cannot or will not appropriate, as the child does not gain an independent voice or even second-person address by the end of the poem. Lorde herself tells us in the first stanza that “I am trying to speak”: like the child, she remains

⁷ In the poem “Fox,” Lorde describes it quite viscerally as “the most riven the most revolted cry on earth.”

functionally mute as her flesh “screams memories” and “old pieces of pain” are struck off her body. Neither she nor the child have access to intelligible voice.

Erich Neumann would characterize this lack of a speech as a fundamental failure, resulting from a disconnect between body and mind brought about by the ego’s identification with the patriarchal “head”-consciousness that denies the body altogether. The separation functions in both directions, and manifests with particular prevalence in the female body:

one can observe a seemingly blunt lack of reactivity in an individual—often a woman—whose head is not capable of an immediate reaction but whose heart consciousness has perceived... *the moment of conception* is hidden and mysterious; the ego of matriarchal consciousness suffers it, often without the head-ego having noticed anything. (99, emphasis added)

When bodily conception (that is, perception, creation) is not integrated into one’s conscious mental schema, the result is silence. What is important here is that Neumann figures the “immediate reaction” of the heart consciousness as muteness—a failed realization of the mind—in other words, a *disability* that must be reintegrated or else ultimately verbalized. In contrast, while Johnson and Pellauer agree that muteness is noticeably feminized, Pellauer argues that falling silent, as many women do, “may be an *appropriate* response when language does not provide concepts that fit experience” (180, emphasis added); one has but to recall the semantic hole of lesbian sexuality that necessitates a return to bodily knowledge that the head-ego fails to contain.

Lorde also has no interest in speaking for the sake of it. For her, the desire for speech is at times dangerous: it is the demanding child which threatens Lorde’s bodily integrity, “beating” her flesh as it is “flying out in all directions.” This is the apex of the havoc that the originary and alienating vocative wreaks on the body of the mother. Desire to speak emerges not from the body’s heart center (“it is not my heart,” Lorde tells us, that is “screaming”) but from the desire to separate, to be born from (“exit”) or to penetrate into (“entry”) the body of the mother, obliterating it in the process.

As much as the child demands winds’ voice, speech does not have a one-to-one correlation with power. It is only in a specific kind of muteness Lorde finds power. What

Johnson does not note, and what Lorde does, is that “the true face of me” can be exposed just as easily through the lack of word as through word itself:

Shall I split
or be cut down
by a word’s complexion or the lack of it
and from what direction
will the opening be made
to show the true face of me

Rather than the poetry of, say, Baudelaire, in which the figure of apostrophe paradoxically acts out a loss of animation, it is the *lack* of a word’s complexion in “Bloodbirth” that will cause “the true face” of Lorde to be revealed, it is a *lack* of apostrophe or direct voice (where voice does not emerge from lips at all) that, in the end, allows both Lorde and beloved to speak in “Pirouette.”

Lorde does equate speech with power, but it is not any kind of speech a reader might recognize as such. The body speaks for itself when she cannot, which is why she imagines the death of the physical body as “the final silence” (41). If it’s not speech as we understand it, does that really make it speech? Does it matter? The word “mute” that Lorde deploys consistently throughout her poems can mean inarticulate, silent, or plosive. Taking it one etymological step further, “plosive” is defined as a consonant that is produced by stopping airflow of the throat during speech. Classicist Anne Carson argues that what we assume speech to be is defined by the silence of the consonants just as much by the sounds of the vowels:

vowels are inconceivable without a prior, dashing innovation. For the components of every linguistic noise are two: (1) a sound (made by the vibration of a column of air in the larynx or nasal cavity as it is expelled past the vocal chords); (2) the starting and stopping of the sound (by interaction of the tongue, teeth, palate, lips, and nose). The actions that start and stop sounds, which we think of as ‘consonants,’ can by themselves produce no sound. ... Consonants are the crucial factor. Consonants mark the edges of sound. (54-55)

In other words, speech is defined by the sounds that silence can make. Johnson does not make note that silence is inherent in the poetic form itself, which can exist even when not animated by voice. Likewise, it is the speech of the body that Lorde invokes to have “spoken myself.” This is

what makes it so difficult to comprehend Lorde's conception of muteness or speech. Her muteness in "Pirouette" is not a muteness that one could call chosen or not chosen but rather the moment of regression to a pre-linguistic silence where speech was never possible at all—the silence of writing, and the silence of desire.

V. WHEN LOVE BECOMES A LIE

sex is not dentistry
the slick filling of aches and cavities
—Margaret Atwood, “Is/Not”

What does it look like to pirouette with only one partner—when it only takes one to tango, as it were? Simply because the bodies of “Pirouette” are connected does not entail that they will find fulfillment that way.

The poem “Making it” describes a love in which there seems to be no distance between Lorde and subject. Without separation, each of the two becomes enveloped in the nightmare scenario of being trapped in giving what one can never receive. Lorde claims to want to make this person both “more and less”—at the moment she tells us what she wants, when we would expect clarification, we receive equivocation. She wants the subject not a part of herself but “a part from” herself, referencing seemingly opposed desires: either the subject apart from and separated by her, or a part taken from and originated in her. This addressee is not a part “of” Lorde, contained within her; she is a part “from” her. Is it possible to have someone be both apart and a part from you? As long as Lorde can identify that she had some part in creating this person (indeed in “Therapy” she’s already emphasized “I want to make you”), that subject can live apart from her, both more and less, or perhaps *neither* more nor less, herself. What she wants is to create and thus define this “you,” the reader-subject, in terms of distance (“from”), with her self as the origin point. Lorde is less interested in eliding this distance between her and subject completely than creating this person both at a distance and at a nearness.

“Making it” is a phrase associated with success (“make it big time”), especially in reaching a place or going somewhere (“make it home”), implying that Lorde is in the process of the fruitful endeavor of arriving at a specific location. Yet making it, she reminds us, is not the same as having made it. In the double-play of “make” as both succeed and create, Lorde claims that together author and subject are able to “mingle color and substance” and combine their material forms. The only color the lovers are capable of sharing is “white,” or the absence of color. In attempting to envelop (“mantle”) the subject’s body she has obliterated it, or at least

refused to voice it on the page, or become entirely unable to describe it in terms of recognizable body parts. The subject is implied to be a part of Lorde entirely in this poem, not “a part from” her. She has no agency and, in any case, no body with which to exert that agency. It is Lorde’s body that is “arcing across” that place, and it is her face that she shares. Lorde can describe the subject’s body only in terms of its blankness, or absence of substance, from which she is free to create, but not receive, the substance of her desire.

In reality, Lorde tells us, both she and her subject want “what we wish to be given ourselves.” Naturally the contrast between “half-self” and “ourselves” is one of wholeness and unity (no longer “I” and “you” but “our”), but the line break offers a double meaning: we ourselves wish to be given what we give, and what we both give and wish to be given is ourselves. The word in itself contains a cohesive and jointly owned “our,” but the recovery of that we is made possible only by the shift in plurality from “self” to “selves.” These selves would not “mingle color and substance” but would, presumably, maintain their individuality and be contained within it in a recognition of sameness comprised of disparate identities. It is not that there is too much nearness and not enough distance, but that the substantively different forms of “my body” and “your white place” cannot close the gap between themselves without both losing substance entirely.

This method of loving is unequivocally painful and unfruitful. The process of making it is equivalent to “suffering through split masks” as each seeks “the other half-self.” That creation of the subject does not arise organically from the subject; it originates solely from Lorde, who shares “my face with you.” There is but one visage, capable of being transposed from author to subject only since the subject herself is blank and incomplete. Two lovers can share a face only because one lacks it, and it is in this that “love becomes a lie.” In attempting to “make” or create the subject out of herself—making the subject not “a part from” Lorde but a part of her—out of blankness, Lorde transforms them both into suffering half-selves. Indeed Lorde can only share her face at all in the first place because it is a mask, able to be donned and removed at will. Lorde can only give what she has made herself to be.

If identity is so constructed as to be transferable in this way, it permits both only a half-face for both subject and author. Although the actions of each half can be described via parallel syntax, as in “we mingle,” “we suffer,” “we are hung up,” the commonality of a singular

“we” can be described only in terms of pain. When one is half one can only look for what one lacks, namely, the other half and thus they must continue seeking “the other half-self.” Sharing a face means a sharing of eyes as much as a sharing of I, and we find that the reciprocity of the gaze that characterized “Therapy” is not possible with only one set of eyes.

Much in the same way as apostrophizing only throws voice onto the subject, and does not invoke the subject’s own voice, the lovers in “Making it” can share a face only because one lacks it. Appropriating the functions of the body connects two subject—lover and beloved, mother and child, poet and reader—only insofar as they themselves are incomplete.

VI. PLEASURE COME HOME

And so Lorde brings to us the realization that bodies fail. As Pat Califia says less apologetically, “I do not believe we can fuck our way to freedom” (16); wholesale tactile sensation is not enough to connect to connect the two lovers in a significant or enduring way. At its outset, Lorde’s poem “Pirouette” also suggests the futility of connection between lovers, in which the beloved’s hands are “like blind needles” and cannot sew. In the first stanza, Lorde draws our attention to the double-failure of the beloved to both see and to connect. Her questions are phrased as statements in a precipitous set of line breaks that cannot be answered:

and

where are you from

you said

and in which these questions become not-questions, lacking the inflection of question marks as equally as quotation marks. The beloved does not have the answers, and neither can any of her questions allow for answers. She attempts to do the impossible, “sewing up stone,” just as she reads Lorde’s lips for some “unknown road through uncertain night.” The beloved attempts to construct her own home in Lorde’s body, “sewing up stone” and “reading over” Lorde’s lips as though vainly connecting dots on a map. “Blunted” needles that can’t thread, can’t sew, and can’t see; a road that seems to lead nowhere and of which its existence is “uncertain” in the first place; thunder without lightning. The beloved’s call (for it’s not quite a question) has been so far abstracted into impossibility to the point of thunder “promising” rain and lightning but lacking both.

The action of the lover’s hands are futile partly because Lorde cannot reciprocate. The beloved could be better characterized as the lover, the active character of the poem. It is she who asks Lorde questions, her hands that touch Lorde’s body; what Lorde does or says can only be inferred based on the actions of the beloved. The hand’s acoustics cannot be returned by someone who is from “a land where all lovers are mute.” Lorde’s mouth isn’t sewn shut because it never could be: halfway through the poem we found out that Lorde has been mute all along, never able to speak in the first place.

It is the beloved who looks for “some road... to examine home,” and yet, by the end of the poem, it is Lorde who finds it, and is able to speak it, in the final line: “I am come home.” How did such a radical change come about? Given that Lorde can’t return the subject’s actions with speech, she must reciprocate them with her own actions. The beloved’s hands can “promise rain,” and they may “follow rain,” but they are not themselves rain. Thunder likewise promises rain but cannot produce it, so Lorde must fulfill the promise of rain herself by spilling her own tears. The innuendo behind “come” is no accident either. This land “where all lovers are mute” associates the fulfillment of sex with a lack of language. This call-and-response has been completed, quite literally through completion, and it is at this moment that she can exit the land of the mute and come home. Thus one could say that for Lorde, coming home feels right as rain, reflected in the emotive response of crying and the physical release of orgasm.

Now that Lorde’s weeping has fulfilled the thunder’s promise of rain, she can begin to fulfill the others. The lover’s hands that were earlier searching for “some road” come to rest “in my doorway”—they have found the entrance to Lorde’s body. The last question from the beloved is accorded a question mark without dialogue tags (“why are you weeping?”) as her presence becomes directly established. As Lorde regains her ability to speak and respond to the beloved, she returns home, and so too does her own sense of self (“I”) arrive. The eye-I that opened the first line of the poem, “I saw,” re-emerges in the final “I am.” The past tense of “I saw” and the “you said”s that has characterized the verse up until this point is replaced by the present tense, firmly situated in this moment. The syntax of this line is just off enough that it is sometimes misquoted as “I have come home,” but that is not quite what Lorde means. Lorde has been transported to home, and transfigured into it (“I am... home”), by the fulfillment of the lover’s promise, and she is able to answer the beloved’s question, in her own way, as directly as she was asked it.

VII. SHE WHO RETURNS

I enter my lover but it is she
in her orgasm who returns.

—Sue Silvermarie, “The Motherbond”

Various forms of the verb “come” are used with marked frequency in Lorde’s poems, especially in her physically explicit poems on the experience of desire (e.g. “we shall come together”), and so its possible play as a double entendre does not seem far-fetched. The phrase “to come” can equally mean three things. The first is “to go towards.” While come and go operate from the same etymological root, and both can carry sexual weight, “go” indicates movement irrespective of any destination, while “come” is characterized by movement directed towards the place occupied by the speaker. The word’s second meaning, in use since at least the 16th century, is “to orgasm,” and thus we find that the two most commonly used verbs of literal and figurative motion in the English language are employed as euphemisms for the physical fulfillment of sex. The third meaning of “come” intimately links the verb to conception and birth, as in, to come into existence; to be born. Thus the phrase “I came,” as in “I orgasmed,” can be taken quite literally to mean “I approached myself,” “I came closer to myself,” or “I came into this world” (i.e. I was born).

This etymology is not incidental to Lorde’s use of the word, for what else is the original land, where “all lovers” are from but where none can speak, but the womb? There is a Western precedent for the association of birth with orgasm, and orgasmic childbirth is not an unknown phenomenon (Buckley, Hotelling). In her study on the moral significance of female orgasm, Pellauer describes orgasm as “the most definite incarnation I know outside of childbirth, for in it I am most completely bound to the stimulation of my body” (173). In experiencing orgasm in “Pirouette,” Lorde encounters a return to her first moment of birth. She is able to cry (the first act of life for any newborn, male or female) and has returned to the original home, the body of the mother (“your hands in my doorway”), here figured as the body of the lover.

Not every person has a womb, but certainly every person has, for a time, been carried in one, and it is this period in the womb that establishes a precedent for the instant fulfillment of

need. Neumann characterizes the mother-fetus relationship as “the fundamental situation of security and the absence of fear” (231) which is the foundation of the infant’s existence, while Susan Bordo describes life in the womb as the time when need and fulfillment occupy the same moment (43). Habitation in the womb is perhaps the only time in an individual’s life when their needs are met at the very instant they arise. It is a state of total dependence, but a dependence that, save extreme circumstances, is never left unfulfilled—a fulfillment that can never again be matched. After giving birth to her first child, Adrienne Rich describes the toll of attempting to match the desire of her newborn child: “my singularity, my uniqueness in the world as his mother—perhaps more dimly also as Woman—evoked a need vaster than any single human being could satisfy, except by loving continuously, unconditionally, from dawn to dark, and often in the middle of the night” (24). All mothers are failures to their children in that they are incapable of fulfilling the needs of that birthed other as they did during pregnancy.

Lorde’s figuring of desire stands in slight contrast’s to Rich, who argued in her 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” that, if the first erotic or sexual bond of the child, male or female, is towards the mother, one could argue that the “natural” sexual orientation of both genders is towards the mother:

If women are the earliest sources of emotional caring and physical nurture for both female and male children, it would seem logical, from a feminist perspective at least, to pose the following questions: whether the search for love and tenderness in both sexes does not originally lead toward women [and] *why in fact women would ever redirect that search* (637)

and, by consequence, lesbian desire emerges from a “natural” desire for the body of the mother. However, sexual desire *for* the mother is not the same as sexual desire *as represented* by the mother. One could flip Rich’s conclusion by questioning her assumption that it is women who have historically provided the “emotional caring and physical nurture” of the child after birth—not that she is incorrect, but that the argument gets messy quickly with the hypothetical objection, what if fathers were mothers? As Lorde imagines fulfillment in childbearing, not childrearing, she bypasses all discussion of socialization or cultural condition to proceed directly toward the biological return to the female womb that is the one universal fact of human life.

The difference for Lorde in “Pirouette” is that she simultaneously returns “home” to the womb at the very moment she exits it. The insight her view offers is one of reversal: orgasm is seen as a return to when all needs are satiated and as an acknowledgment that they never will be. While Pellauer argues for the similarities between orgasm and childbirth, she also acknowledges that orgasm is “*suis generis*. It is paradoxical. Ecstasy is what is at stake here. *Ek-stasis*, standing outside the self, is the closest word for this state” (172). When Lorde births herself in fulfilling the promise of the beloved through her own bodily reactions (crying, orgasm) and not the reactions of the body of the mother, she reclaims orgasm not only as life or birth but—and this may seem a trivial distinction although it is not—as *rebirth*.

Rebirth, made possible through the mechanics of loving, is imagined both as a return to and as an independence from the body of the mother, in which the desire to be a part of and a part from the mother’s body is successfully realized. Lorde refigures the loss of the constant fulfilling of desire in utero as a new kind of fulfillment in which a woman both contains and is contained by the other. Lorde’s approach to desire is not one of completion but one of continual reinscription. Ultimately to experience orgasm with a lover is to give birth, not to the beloved, or even a child: it is to birth oneself. This is reflected in the titles of her other poems on the reciprocity of sex, such as “Recreation,” which is something done to relax, entertain, renew yourself; it also means to create again or restore. The “recreation” of sex is both the act of creating something else again, and of creating yourself again.

Beyond that, Lorde also imagines sex independently of patriarchal definitions of power. The futility of the lover’s hands in “Pirouette” echoes the procreative futility of homosexuality. The hands can’t penetrate stone but they can enter the “doorway” of Lorde’s body. Just as a blind needle penetrates without connecting, lacking the necessary elements for threading, a lover’s finger is able to physically penetrate a body without the possibility of literal conception. Read this way, it is not that the hands are blind and can’t see; they are like “blind needles” and can’t sew. They lack the ability to stitch the fabrics of two biologically alike bodies into one. The beloved’s attempt to sew up stone is just as futile as following a road with no destination.

Although the sex in “Pirouette” is non-reproductive and can never be, it is still capable of the reciprocity of creation. In heterosexual sex, orgasm is what threads or connects the two

lovers together; the normative experience is the biological continuation of those bodies.⁸ While heterosexual, cisgender male orgasm is the only factor that is relevant for procreative reproduction, female orgasm is defined by no such limitations. Lorde re-appropriates the reproduction of heterosexual sex, imagining it not in the creation of another, independent third being but in the re-inscribing of the agency of two disparate individuals who are both one and not-one. The procreative nature of heterosexual desire has been reappropriated not to further any evolutionary goal but to think of (that is, conceive) the beloved's body. When orgasm does not have a one-to-one correspondence with procreation, both beloved and lover are free to displace the metaphor of conception towards a deepening of selfhood. The lack of connection in a needle without thread is what allows these lovers to promise and fulfill on their own terms.

⁸ Abstinence-only sex education still holds sway in America for the same reason. Sex detached from its procreative function is incredibly threatening to a dominant patriarchal power structure because it reframes the power of the female outside her biological capacity.

VIII. A TEXT BY ITSELF

Lorde conflates bodies from the opening of the poem “Recreation,” in which she begins by telling the reader that

your body moves
under my hands
charged and waiting

which leaves us to wonder, are Lorde’s hands charged and waiting, or is the beloved’s body? It is “our word countries” that become “my body” that becomes “the poem” that, it turns out, “you make,” not I. The poem does not contain a single line that states, only those that fail to answer, much like the beloved’s statements in “Pirouette.” The reader’s initial and subsequent confusion—which *one?*—mimic’s the lover’s quandary. Bodies are indistinguishable between author-creator and poem-object as each makes and consumes simultaneously. “Even now,” in the midst of writing the poem, Lorde writes, “I do not want to make a poem”. What she wants is “to make you.” Presumably if she could create the “you” she would, else she would not make a poem she does not want—except there is no way for her to create her subject, or create a reader, without writing a poem. A reader exists only insofar as there is something to read. As Albert Borgmann phrases it, “a text by itself is helpless” (117).

If a text alone can do nothing, and a reader exists only because there is a text, and a text exists only because there is a poet, but a poet cannot exist without a reader... how do we untangle this mess? For sexuality scholar Mary Pellauer, the power dynamics are not incidental here. The beloved, in her case male, has power only because

I respond to him and this response mine ... When his hands glide along my skin, I experience it as the power of his hands and not the power of my response. He may experience it as the power of my response, but I do not. And possibly I cannot, because what is ‘really’ happening here is the power of the connectedness between us. The tingle is neither in his hands nor in my skin, but only at the interface between them. (174)

Separated there is no power. Pellauer notes that she does not at first perceive the interconnectedness of this power, interpreting it in the moment as owing entirely to the beloved. And this concept is as yet insufficient, she adds, mainly because “‘interface’ is not a very sexy

word.” Lorde’s version of the unsexy interface is the “doorway” of her body, which adds an important spatial distinction, since a doorway is not technically an object (a door), but a lack of one (the place where a door would be). The doorway to the body is a threshold, a liminal space or non-object that marks the transition between two other spaces/non-spaces. Lorde figures desire as a physical place originating from metaphysical senses, one that we can enter or exit (we fall into or out of love, if not with any sense of agency over the matter), and that is manifested in the “word countries” of the body. The answer to the marvelous arithmetics of distance thus may not be

$$\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{2} = 1 \quad \text{Eq. 1}$$

but rather

$$1 + 1 = 1 \quad \text{Eq. 2}$$

in which lover and beloved create each other in a space they themselves have created. This may perhaps be even more rational than marvelous arithmetics: it is the body that provides sense and meaning, and it does so in its strongest form when two bodies are in contact with one another. Lorde’s body becomes the threshold to a larger place and sense of being.

The continual re-creation of desire is reflected in the structure of the poems themselves. The line “coming together” begins the poem in the present tense gerund of action, followed by

it is easier to work
after our bodies
meet
paper and pen
neither care nor profit

The poem is not static even as it is printed on the page: each line shifts, shimmering with meaning, every potentiality at once hidden and revealed. The poem rewrites itself, perpetually. Stringing the poem together linearly would only inevitably prioritize one meaning over many

possible others. This technique is the Greek apo koinou, a fragmentation of the poetic form, in which “each line serves a double purpose of continuing the last one and initiating the next one; each line is an intermediary for the next” (Aviram 198). Especially in Lorde’s poetry, apo koinou is a way of subordinating the sentence structure to the association of ideas as they are explored further and more deeply through the sequence of the poem. Because ... apo koinou suspends the temporality or causality normally implied in discrete sentences and their orderly sequence, it allows Lorde's voice to reveal feelings that are chaotic, sometimes painful, sometimes contradictory, without undoing those very features by subordinating the feelings to the ordinary rules of syntax. (37)

The meaning of the poem depends upon its fragmentation, but while fragmentation can allow for the embrace of many identifications, experiencing it is not enough to recover one’s identity. Only with each line distinct from, yet connected to, the others is where meaning can emerge. The purpose of apo koinou is to suspend the reader between two opposing categories in order to dwell in the ensuing vacant space where both and neither are possible, much in the same way that the liminal space or doorway of Lorde’s body is what connects the two lovers.

Unlike mathematics, language provides no order of operations with which to compute meaning divided on the page. The spatial separations are what give a continual reinscribing of the multiplicity of a phrase’s function, and each possibility lies not within the phrase itself but in the spaces between each. It is only in the structure of line breaks that multiplicity of meaning prevails without dominance over the others. Expansion of the realm of the possible can be created only in the space between separation and connection, much in the same way that Lorde experiences desire. Through apo koinou, “Recreation” recreates the act of loving in its own reading, inevitably drawing the reader into the lovers’ relationship.

IX. OUR CONJUGATING BUSINESS

lying exposed and together
my children your children their children
bent on our conjugating business.

—Audre Lorde, “Bloodbirth”

The poem “Bloodbirth” views pregnancy in quite a different light from orgasm. This child that inhabits Lorde’s body in this poem is “bent on our conjugating business,” in other words, it forms the written word of her poetry. The newborn of “Bloodbirth” is both a literal child and the figurative one, the written word and the fetus that threatens to lay Lorde bare. Just as a fetus, emerging face-first during birth, has the potential to “split” or “cut down” the body of the mother (or, at the very least, make her feel as though this were true), “a word’s complexion or the lack of it” has the power to break down the boundaries of the writer-mother-creator. Complexion is what the face appears to be—the quality, character, or condition of the skin, the organ of touch and feeling that separates the body from its external surroundings. That a word may lack complexion, or separation from the world around it, also has the potential to cut Lorde down. In fact, she takes it as a given that it will do so, giving us only two options: “shall I split” (be divided) “or be cut down” (reduced in stature). No matter what, the word will open Lorde to expose “the true face of her.”

The business of conjugation involves yoking together two lovers through sex, as well as manipulating a verb’s syntax or a possessive’s declension to produce meaningful phrases. The conjugating business is one that is ultimately performed between a lover and beloved; although it is “our” business, Lorde does not explicitly identify the love subject-object in this poem. It is tempting to fill this void with the reader, but the act of reading the poem is not what constitutes conjugating business.

Coming together
it is easier to work
after our bodies meet

To come together is to be joined, yoked physically, and to make sense, to fall into place. Lorde writes that bodies come together only after “bodies meet paper and pen” but they meet paper and pen only in the lines *after* they come together. It is not that writing as well as sex is the conjugating business: it is that both together constitute the conjugating business, the combination of the making and the reading of it.

The conjugating business conceives lover and beloved, words and readers. The reader-beloved figures prominently once again only insofar as Lorde creates her. The image in this stanza is one of overwhelming proliferation, with a distinction between “my” and “your” children that turns back on itself. Lorde’s children, in all their forms, cycle back to the original conjugating business. In “Recreation,” both lovers are at once writers and readers, as bodies substitute for paper and pen:

my body
writes into your flesh
the poem
you make of me.

Lorde’s body is being searched and read like a poem, even transmuted into one. The beloved transforms the lover into a poem, and the lover then writes that poem into the flesh of the beloved: “the poem you make of me.” The beloved of “Pirouette” does this too, “reading over Lorde’s lips,” making her into a poem only insofar as she has read and understood her. Importantly, *the poem itself* is not the child or creation that Lorde birthes, as paper and pen “neither care nor profit whether we write or not.” Paper receives no value from having a poem written upon it; a pen couldn’t care to ink the words. “But...” the lovers “cut the leash” anyway. Lorde’s profit is only in the act of creating lover-reader, who exists only because their writer exists.

X. FLESH THAT HUNGERS

Blood pulsing with energy.
My body echoing her words
repeating to me yes yes yes.

— Notes taken while I read Rich, 12 June 2019

The birthing of poem and reader occurs partly due to the nature of writing itself. The purpose of poetry is not to paraphrase reality. Cleanth Brooks believes a true poem to be “a simulacrum of reality... an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience” (1228). Poetry means to engender within readers the same physical state as though they were experiencing the writer’s sensations for themselves. As linguistic theorist Roman Jakobson describes it, all linguistic expression operates between two poles, and

lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. In aphasia one or the other of these two processes is restricted or totally blocked—an effect which makes the study of aphasia particularly illuminating for the linguist. (1152)

Operating under this view, all speech is characterized either by metaphor or metonymy. The use of metaphor transfers meaning, and poetry itself replaces the “true face” of the signified (sex, anger, violence, joy) with the signifier, the “word’s complexion.” What readers see or read on the page is only the word’s complexion, the “eye”; what the complexion points to is precisely the possibility of its own lack that opens to reveal the “true face of me,” the “I” of the poet.

The *act* of reading writing can then be characterized within these extremes as beyond metaphoric, for writing and reading is not a transferring of emotional knowledge from the body-mind of the author to the body-mind of the reader but an interaction between the two. The reader brings to the text their own “personality traits, memories of past events, present needs ... and a particular physical condition” (Rosenblatt 30) and the text itself “unsettles, provokes,

results in a gnawing, grasping, a vague, indefinable sense that [the reader] can choose to stay with, inquire into, or dismiss” (Howard 204). In other words, reader and text act upon and create each other, not just psychically but physically; reading affects who we are. And if that is true, it “necessarily affects what we know and what we do. We could say then, that the experience of reading has not only altered us *phenomenologically*, it has altered us *biologically*” (Sumara 66, as quoted in Howard 205).

Eugene Gendlin finds that most modern philosophers in the West assume all order “to be entirely imposed by a history, a culture, or a conceptual interpretation.” But, he asks, “what is this imposed order imposed upon?” (25). Pellauer agrees that the West is quick to talk about the need to bring the spirit or mind down to the body, adding that it has “been less apt to talk at length about the gifts body gives to the spirit” (179). Both find order in a bottom-up approach, beginning with the order “of Nature, the person, the practice, the body” (Gendlin 24).

At its core, so too does close-reading emphasize a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down one. The purpose of textual interpretation is to explain or make aware what the poetry engenders in the body of the reader: “when we speak of *interpreting* stories, *analyzing* poems, *finding* meaning and themes in poems, plays or essays, our language may be concealing the intricate, embodied nature of the reader-text relationship” (Howard 210). Analysis emerges from a concentrated focus on the perception of the changes, biological or phenomenological, wrought in the body and precipitated by reading. We often speak of the methods by which the text accomplishes these changes as literary techniques and devices.

However, the moment that a reader perceives an idea or insight does not create the experience of perception. Neumann’s “hidden and mysterious” moment of conception emerges once again as the body’s perception of the text, the conceiving of, the birthing, or the understanding of the text, does not mean the head-ego is aware of it. In fact, perception can only follow experience, making the reader aware of its effects, for the many details explicated through analysis “were implicit in the impression [of the reader] before they were noticed” (210). The unfolding of meaning through analysis does not create a new impression of a text, it only makes the reader aware of one created in the act of reading. Most importantly, over-emphasis on perception risks imposing external boundaries, because “it is not the way we are in our situations. Perception divides your perception of me from mine of you. But interaction is more

than two perceptions. And interaction is not inherently divided” (Gendlin 15). Readers can move past the distinction between subject and object (or, say, lover and beloved) by way of speaking from the actions of the body in the situation. Lorde recognizes this on a fundamental level, for it is

out of my flesh that hungers
and my mouth that knows
comes the shape I am seeking
for reason.

For Lorde, order is not imposed by history or culture, but emerges from unfulfilled desire. The human condition is to inhabit a desiring state. The parallel structure of “flesh that hungers” and “mouth that knows” equates that desire with knowledge, and knowledge with body—specifically the desiring body. Note the use of “come” again here. It is out of the hungering body that another physical form (“shape”) comes, circling back to approach the body of the lover from which it emerges. And that shape is, unsurprisingly, “the curve of your waiting body.” To look for reason is to look for cause or explanation—it is the *why* that Lorde seeks and the *why* that she finds in her hungering flesh and the curves of the beloved. Fulfillment of Lorde’s desire comes from the recognition that meaning emerges from “hunger,” or unfulfilled desire in its own right. She presents the yearning of the body as a given to be embraced, not a problem to be solved.

The paradoxical nature of desire means that it is not meant to be filled. The desiring body inhabits a liminal space between I and not-I, between lover and beloved, whether or not that desire is filled. Filling the desire does not remove or contain the threat any more so than not filling it does—only defers it, and thus we continue to inhabit self-possessed bodies that cling to their own boundaries and live in perpetual fear of desire. We can resist the dissolution of those bounds in erotic emotion, but there is another option: embrace it. Desire can serve as a glimpse into a new view of the ‘I’ altogether, to a way of understanding the opening of the self.

Represented analogously to Lorde’s envisioning of connection as the space created by the interaction between two lovers, neither reader nor writer exist without the other via an unduplicable combination, an unsexy interface, a liminal doorway. Reading is viscerally connective and transformative in the way that conjugation and consummation is. The transaction of reading “*is the space* between reader and text and what happens when we [the readers] live

there” (Howard 205, emphasis mine). Reading-writing is defined by silence; it is the land where all “lovers” are physically mute, the page on which tongueless speech is contained within quotation marks and entire conversations occur in silence.

In reading, one enters the body of the poet-lover, allowing oneself to be made and consumed just as one makes and consumes. Perhaps it is possible for readers and writers to “dabble in the glamor of *grammata* without submitting themselves to wholesale erotic takeover” (Carson 165), but such dabbling reflects a refusal to become a daughter to the poet-mother, to refuse to submit to the “change of self entailed” in the act of reading. Refusing to submit to the written word with all the experience of erotic consumption that it entails, is precisely what Lorde would call the pornographic. She writes that

We have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (88)

Reading that ignores or, worse, resists the internal state of the body is precisely what Lorde would term pornographic, for reading is nothing but a bodily act. To read is to create and be created by the connection formed by the writer-reader interaction through the medium of the text, in the space, physical or metaphysical, formed when bodies coincide. the interface between bodies formed only when bodies, physically or metaphysically, touch.

XI. TRANSGRESSIVE MOTHERHOOD

Curled in the placenta of the real
which was to feed & which is strangling her.

—Adrienne Rich

In theological doctrine, as well as sociology and psychoanalytic theory, the mother and son have historically been the determinative dyad. “Small wonder,” Rich writes, “since all [of these] have been produced by sons” (226). Like intimate and intense relationships between women generally, the relationship between mother and daughter profoundly threatens men, as a “potentially dangerous or hostile act, a conspiracy, a subversion, a needless and grotesque thing,” viewed in the same light as the self-segregation of women in lesbian relationships (106). I would argue that it is not only the *actual* relationship between mother-daughters that threatens *actual* men, but that what the relationship itself signifies, growth of the ego, threatens what the body signifies, figurative selfhood.

The non-totalized meaning of “Recreation”—and recognizable, for that matter, in nearly all of Lorde’s work—is analogous to the fragmentation and creation inherent in desire and mothering. To attempt to totalize, as Barthes tells us, is “to reduce the text to the unity of meaning, by a deceptively univocal reading, ... to sketch the castrating gesture” (16); to castrate oneself and to castrate the author, in other words to preemptively “cut down” the multiplicity of meaning inherent in non-totalization that emerges from the creative act of reading. What Barthes describes as the castrating gesture could also be said to be a castration of the mother, the masculine impulse to peremptorily control, contain, and repossess childbirth. Due to dissociation from conception, a man first experiences himself as a son, and only later as a father. The male fixation on legitimacy, according to Rich,

goes deeper than desire to hand one’s possession to one’s own blood-line; it cuts back to the male need to say “I too have the power of procreation—these are my seed, my own begotten children.” ... The command of Yahweh: “Be fruitful and multiply,” is an entirely patriarchal one; he is not invoking the Great Mother but bidding his sons beget still more sons. (119)

Whether it is via cultural, biological, or “mystical” approaches, the expansion of the self envisioned through motherhood is highly threatening. The creative power of motherhood leads to masculine resentment that expresses itself in phallogocentric thinking (e.g. “penis envy”). What the “castrating gesture” represents culturally, if not individually, is the womb-envy of creation. A cisgender woman can give birth, and for that matter even a “practicing” lesbian—Lorde herself had two children during her first marriage to Edwin Rollins. Rich wonders: “is it simply that in looking at his mother he [the male] is reminded, somewhere beyond repression, of his existence as a mere speck, a weak, blind, clot of flesh growing inside her body? Remembering a time when he was nothing, is he forced to acknowledge a time when he will no longer exist?” (188).

Rich may be correct, but the issue does not play out as “simply” as all that. Reappropriating the mother for her creative power could be described as the metaphor behind the artistic impulse to create that is applicable to women just as much as men. As Lorde demonstrates, the relationship is not threatening to men alone. Childbirth is dangerous for the mother, because it threatens to cut her open. It is dangerous for the child, as entry into life is perhaps the most traumatic moment of life. And it is ultimately dangerous to the poet: “of course I am afraid,” Lorde writes in a later essay, “because the transformation of silence into language... is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (42). Writing, desire, and childbirth, represent concomitant hostile and threatening lands, located in the body of the mother.

As Barbara Johnson asks it, “is autobiography somehow always in the process of symbolically killing the mother off by telling her the lie that we have given birth to ourselves?” (182). In her analysis of female-authored works like *Frankenstein*, she finds that an author must “figuratively repeat the matricide that her physical birth all too literally entailed” (187). The Mother is a hostile and threatening land that must be possessed, reduced, and controlled, lest she swallow her children back into her dark caves.

Couldn't one then argue that Lorde's emphasis on the creative acts of loving and writing, writing herself into the role of the mother (whether in a biologically procreative sense or no), reflect a similar desire to usurp the body of the mother-Woman? Lorde imagines the desiring and creative body in a maternal way, but to say that she—or any writer, male or female—is simply jealous of the mothering body implies a failure of the imagination. This issue cannot be explained away by the oversimplified claim that men or even women are searching for the

mother in order to wrench away from and reappropriate her body. One can re-route this issue with another question: why do we look to the mother for answers, and why is that “mothers” (creators, life-givers, poets, artists) seem to be the place where we find the answers? In what direction does the body of the mother point us?

From a Western cultural viewpoint, a woman who grows up in a male-dominated society “still feels, at moments, wildly unmothered” in her adulthood (Rich 224). Even a mother who is an equal provider or a so-called matriarch is expected to deliver her children from the nuclear family over to the patriarchal system of education, law, and sexual codes, and it is her responsibility to introduce them to that system with minimal maladjustment. A woman may feel obliged to or even happily comply with providing emotional support to others, in a sense giving what she has always felt she lacked. Such a failure of the mother may be inscribed by the power dynamics of that culture. It may also be only a gendered reflection of the nature of unfulfilled desire itself, in which birth entails a failure at all levels.

On a broader and culturally wider level, the mother is perceived as more immediate parent than the father because one is born from the mother. As Joseph Campbell phrases it, “the first experience of any infant is the mother, so that the image of woman is the image of the world.” It seems logical, then, for people across cultures to turn to the body of the mother in explaining the unknowns of the universe. Much of ancient mythology is a translation of the world into the mother image, in whose body we find the manifestation of a feminized creativity. “We talk of Mother Earth and so forth,” Campbell notes, and we find that it is in agricultural societies that the goddess is the predominant form.

If this is true, the issue of writing, desire, and motherhood is then not so much a *biological* jealousy of the womb as much as a desire—only one insofar as it represents the desire and terror of creation. Neumann argues that authorities, as manifested in

the form of the father-archetype, the patriarchal culture canon, and the super-ego, are engaged in such a manner as to guarantee a relative stability of the culture by excluding the unsettling, transformative character of the anima and individual development. This is why the creative process that is necessarily linked with the fear of the transformative character of the Feminine is shoved off on those who live on the fringes, the creative persons. (255)

Small wonder that even the most joyous of Lorde's love poems are precipitous, inhabiting tension and conflict. Mothering then becomes not only a radically transgressive act, it may be *the* radically transgressive act. In touching the beloved, Lorde says, "my fingers conceive your flesh," in other words: when I touch the skin of my beloved, her flesh inhabits and grows in me. This is reciprocal conception. And, like loving, and like writing, there is not a one-to-one correlation of creative agency during pregnancy. Rich tells us that pregnancy expands and reforms the sensory perception of the mother just as much as it does the child's: "in early pregnancy the stirring of the fetus felt like ghostly tremors of my own body, later like the movements of a being imprisoned in me; but both sensations were my sensations, contributing to my own sense of physical and psychic space" (63).

Creation is not a one-way street. Writing-reading, sex, and pregnancy all share the terror that emerges from a desire for reciprocated connection, and for enhancing and broadening one's sense of "I." Just as the lover in Lorde's poetry creates and is created in touching the beloved's flesh, pregnancy expands one's sense of being. In "Therapy," the eyes—the outer representation of the self—are searching the spaces of the beloved "like a hungry child." Lorde's eyes are the twin, hungry children that also want to grow and gestate the lover. She doesn't want to make a poem, she wants to take you into her and make "you" even more of an independent being, to make you and "take you made into me."

XII. CODA

What in fact I keep choosing
are these words...
from which time to time the truth
breaks moist and green.

—Adrienne Rich, “Cartographies of Silence”

The body contains knowledge, even if that knowledge is unintelligible to the mind the body inhabits and indeed might never be: “when women make love beyond the first exploration,” Lorde writes, “we meet each other knowing in a landscape the rest of our lives attempts to understand.” The landscape of the body is where each other’s knowing meets, and that lived experience for Lorde never lies. Writing through the body allows one to bear witness to the body, mapping topographically one’s experiences for the first or the umpteenth exploration.

When reading Lorde’s poetry, it always seems to be that in attempting to describe one thing, one ends up exactly at the place one started. A child beats about for exit and for entry, a lover searching for another only returns to themselves, a writer goes around and around a point that resists being spoken. Just such a flat temporal circle, according to Jung, is the most powerful symbol, “one of the great primordial images of mankind... in considering the symbol of the circle, we are analyzing the self” (Campbell). Lacanian desire has traditionally been thought of as circular and destructive, its searching representing the endless metonymic shifts sliding under the signified. Lorde’s desire, however, is circular and regenerative: “I want to make you more and less a part from my self,” she says.

What could be more maddening, and more divine, than to begin to recognize the reflection of the circle wavering on the written page? According to Campbell, the circle has both a spatial and a temporal aspect, that is, you leave, go somewhere, and in that movement you return to the origin, just as one does during orgasm. The spatial aspect enframes this journey within a physical place mediated by boundaries. The circle for Lorde does not exist at all times. It is the liminal doorway between two lovers’ bodies, created only in the moment that they touch;

it is the changes wrought in body of the reader whose eyes track a poem; it is the fulfillment of desire of a fetus contained within and expanding the “I” of the mother.

Earlier, I said my work is to speak the truths of Lorde, but I can only do this as I see them. As I look to her truths using the perceptions of my body—what discomforts me, what echoes in me—I speak the text’s truths through the only medium I have available to me. This may necessarily entail changes to the truths of her work as others see and embody them. I like to imagine Lorde smiling at this. Like loving, reading-writing needs two to work. In considering Lorde’s work, we come to realize that the absence of a center is precisely where there is an absence of subject and an absence of author. Lorde categorizes her own work under the label “biomythography,” which directly addresses this issue, for the telling of a story necessarily entails a changing of it. Claude Lévi-Straus reminds us that it is “music and mythology [that] bring man face to face with virtual objects whose shadow alone is actual... myths have no authors” (25). This is because, as Campbell says, myths are about you. What all myths share is that they exist to describe the reader who becomes the author. One can only submit to a poem in the same way that one submits to the erotic. Let yourself read. Let yourself be read. Danger lies ahead, for it means submitting to a certain loss of control, allowing oneself to be made and consumed just as one makes and consumes—but just as rewarding for the same reason.

XIII. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, OR, IT TAKES A VILLAGE

The best parts of me are not mine. They were first another's who gave them to me—gave them, or had them borrowed, or else soaked up unwittingly by osmosis.

This thesis had its origins far, far removed from where it has ended up today. I spent much of this summer tackling the topic of motherhood from other angles, one of which was the life and work of Sylvia Plath. A big thank you is warranted, therefore, to all those at Smith, that lovely cross-coastal women's college, who aided me in my research on the Plath archives. In the first instance, to Karen Kukil, the editor of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, for meeting with me to discuss at length Plath's revision process and the importance of and overreliance on biography. Thank you also to Mary Biddle and Amy Hague at Special Collections, who graciously looked the other way when I pulled two dozen boxes over the daily limit for five days running.

Thank you to my thesis advisor Michelle Decker, who gives the world and who deserves the world. If she knew the monster she would create, she might never have showed me her Barbara Johnson reader on that fateful day in February, but I'm grateful all the same. Please, only date men who read from now on.

Thank you to Glenn Simshaw, who first taught me how to use a footnote and hasn't had a good night's sleep since; to Tessie Prakas, who demonstrated to me what academic conversation can look like at its best; to Brent Armendinger, my unofficial second reader even if he never realized it; and to Katharine Keigher, the woman who warned me that literature is eternal. As well as tattoos.

And, because I promised, to KC Welsh, the second gayest lesbian I know (I also wish my title could have been "Lesbians Do It Better," I'm sorry—I know you understand). Thank you to Lexie Varga and Anezka Boyle, as always, for taking care of me when I forgot how to, and for much everything else besides.

And, it goes without saying, but not so much so that I can't not say it: to my mother.

**AN EXTENSIVE BUT NOT ENTIRELY EXHAUSTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE
SOURCES THAT HAVE HAD AN IMPACT, SMALL OR LARGE, ON MY THINKING
FOR THIS PAPER IN THE PAST SIX MONTHS, INCLUDING WORKS CITED**

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